

with an urban design input. The increase of urban design education into planning, architecture, engineering and surveying courses has to be the most important priority for the work of UDAL.

UDAL must take a stand in the Millennium dome! #

John Biggs

From Northern Ireland

"I'm leaning on a bus stop listening to the Lavery's din Bradbury Place Spring '93 old sensations rushing in and I'm talking to a lad from Craigavad about nothing in particular wondering what makes me me and him him and us individual" ¹

Cities and song

In July last year Joe Holyoak,² in a blatant attempt to sound like a typical Bob Jarvis's Endpiece, wrote a short road movie script about his trip across North Carolina. He suggested a soundtrack which celebrated in music and song the towns and places he passed through. He asked about the music celebrating British towns. Why do we not celebrate our well-loved places in modern song?

In partial answer to his questions, I suggest he listens to what is happening in the regions, particularly Northern Ireland. While Belfast is not a conventionally beautiful city, it is an interesting and exciting place to live in and hang out. It is a city that has an effect on your emotions through its inherited culture and traditions. It is most definitely unique. It is a city that inspires song.

My personal favourite artist, Andy White, sings about other cities he has lived in. In his lyrics, each part of London or Dublin has its own character and imprints its own memories about being in a certain place at a certain time I find it refreshing that new places and

experiences can inspire creativity. His songs express better than I ever could, the mix of urban heritage, culture and personal feelings, which produce a 'sense of place' that derives its uniqueness from a combination of people and environment. It is this sort of 'sense of place' which urban designers strive to create or contribute towards.

It is from this perspective I find it strange that while singers reminisce about places which hold memories and celebrate the distinctiveness of local towns and cities, the UK is being treated like some homogenous entity by groups of design professionals who should know better. This is where the Urban Design Alliance comes in with what appears to be an incredible amount of insensitivity. Firstly, insensitivity to the work of the Urban Design Group but more importantly, insensitivity to 'sense of place'.

UDAL's aims

The well-founded rationale is to change professional behaviour, to bring down barriers and to promote collaboration across the various disciplines. All this sounds very familiar and was part of the reason for joining the UDG at a personal level. It is difficult to find fault with these aims, but it is also difficult to see how this is substantially different from the Urban Design Group rationale. And if the initiative is nothing new, how will it attract professionals and individuals that are not already involved in the work of the UDG?

Of course, the UDG does not have a monopoly over urban design issues but it has been an independent and influential voice particularly following the higher profile given to urban quality and design by John Gummer. Will the UDAL actually add anything to this on-going debate?

I feel that any new contributions or efforts in promoting urban design should not reinvent existing groups but become focused on the local and

regional levels. And this is where I have problems with the UDAL and how it appears to be organised in a manner that seeks to establish a national agenda - one which is potentially insensitive to the local context and sense of place.

Sense of place and regions

The draft statement of objectives of the UDAL claims that sense of place can be reinforced by good urban design. Yet, one of the major omissions of this statement is the almost total lack of any regional dimension beyond London and the lack of any specific aims to protect and enhance local distinctiveness and sense of place. For example, the UDAL answers the questions 'What is Urban Design?' by quoting a definition contained in Planning Policy Guidance Note 1. Maybe it is a little obvious to state that PPG1 does not apply to Northern Ireland, as it operates under a different legislative and organisational context. Its equivalent is Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 1 which manages to quote almost verbatim, the PPG1 definition of urban design as concerned with "... the complex interrelationships between all the elements of built and unbuilt space"³ without actually mentioning urban design and being happy to leave this as a definition of material planning considerations.

The insensitivity to the regional context is also amply demonstrated by the name of the organisation and the potential disaster of having an acronym, which sounds like a paramilitary group and appears on gable wall murals throughout Northern Ireland. This is the trap the Urban Villages Forum fell into and I urge the UDAL not to do the same.

Conclusion

Overall, it is not what is included as part of the UDAL which causes me problems: raising the profile of good urban design, recognising the



possible contribution to the wider debate surrounding compact sustainable cities and realising that urban design has to be a shared responsibility. The problems are the omissions from the UDAL objectives, concerning sense of place and sensitivity of regional problems, and the fear that these omissions were not made deliberately, bad as that might be, but that they were made through ignorance and lack of knowledge of regional issues.

The UDAL needs to be sensitive to the local and regional contexts and to listen to those who understand their locality and sense of place, such as the person who knows that Belfast City suits the rain.

"Now I'm standing writing this song on the classified ads pages of the evening paper Belfast city's in the rain lights are coming on it's Saturday evening and I'm ready to go drinking again."⁴ #

Michael Crilly

References

1. White, Andy. 1994. Extracts from 'Street Scenes from my Heart' on the *Destination Beautiful* album, Warner Music UK.
2. Holyoak, Joe. 1996. 'Songs About Towns'. *Urban Design Quarterly* July (59) p47.
3. Department for the Environment for Northern Ireland. 1997. *Draft Planning Policy Statement 1: General Principles*. Planning Service, Belfast.
4. White, Andy. 1992. Extracts from 'James Joyce's Grave' on the *Out There* album, Warner Music UK.